

**Of
Memory
and
Furniture

Bron
Bateman**



FREMANTLE PRESS

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Portrait of the Artist

For Allen

I cannot contain my longing
for everyone else to be gone,

to stand, alone,

a pulse-beat distance from its surface,
skin upon skin.

I close my eyes
as if I were blind,
to better learn its composition.

My fingertips

hum

with the white noise of texture.

Streams of enamel flow downward,
to form round, velveteen blisters
that bulge beneath my thumb.

I want to be like Thomas,
to work my fingers,
knuckle-deep,
into the wounds of your canvas,
to slide my palms
down its shiny, red arteries of colour,

to rest.

To breathe.

In this new,
now-familiar landscape.

My Tattoo: I

I wait my turn

as a stranger has a tiger inked
onto his shoulder, hear him yelp
as it's wiped clean with metho.

The flesh beneath his design
flushes with blood.

This ugly, red-faced biker
makes me itchy.

I want to close my eyes and
scratch my nails across
his brand-new skin.

On the walls, flash,
drenched with colour, hangs in
smoke-stained plastic sleeves.
Row upon row of gendered certainty.
These are the tattoos for
virgins and teenagers, for bad boys
and bitches from the suburbs.

The girl who replies with *Cool Bananas*
to everything I say, who makes a face
when I say I'm a poet
—the girl I am trusting with my skin—
mixes ink on the back of her gloved hand:
teal, aquamarine and a drop of navy.
She sticks out her tongue,

silent for the first time in half an hour,
as the tattoo gun's sullen hum
slowly stipples the letters of a poem
in a semicircle on my bicep.

The heat of permanency burns.

My Tattoo: II

On my skin. Always.
Beneath my clothes,
glimpses of colour through

the holes of my brown shirt,
washed by water.

What noun...

With you.

What noun...

I sweat beads of ink.

What noun...

Bite me and taste
the Green
of aloe vera and seawater,
grass and moss.

*What noun did I want
spoken on my skin
my whole life through?*

motherwarm

For Kelly

I expected neither mess nor pain.
Just blood, neatly contained.
But I should have known.
I have been opened.
We bring forth, in noise and fluid,
creatures both alive and dead.
The twelve-week foetus
I birthed into my hand.
This plastic disc.
A gaping maw.
A similar silence.

Beautiful Girl

For Sophie

They're taking photos of their baby.
They have, I think, no idea of the Code Blue,
the plunging of the heartbeat to 65, the room suddenly
filling with doctors and nurses, with noise,
four of us holding her stirruped legs
urging her to *push push push*.

Then safety. A baby girl.

But blood. Everywhere blood.
I watch as a midwife crawls on her hands and knees,
collecting blood clots,
slushing them into a metal bowl. *700 millilitres*, she says.
I walk down to the end of the table, to watch the Doctor
stitching up Sophie, stitching up a huge
L-shaped episiotomy.
Blood drizzles down her buttocks,
onto the knees and plastic coat of the Doctor,
who packs her with cotton and a riverbed of stitches, one at a time.

That's a lot of blood, I say.

He ignores me.

A lot of blood...

That's what girls do, he says,
in this situation.

Chesty Blond

For Noah

She takes clippers to shave the back of his neck.
His skin, untouched by sun,
is white, fine and soft.
Tender. Defenceless.

She bends down, brushes her lips
against his nape.
Goosebumps.
He wriggles and laughs.

He has discovered singlets.
While the fire in the lounge room blazes,
he runs around in fleecy pyjama bottoms,
slippers—and a new white singlet.

They went to Kmart. He chose,
from seemingly identical rows
of boys underwear,
the only brand he wanted:

a broad-chested caricature
of Australian masculinity.
Could he please
have a blue one as well?

He is full of instructions,
demanding she use the
#2 comb at the bottom of his hair,
a #3 for the rest, but it has to be

long enough for shaping wax and spikes.
 Does it look exactly like last time?
 Will it look tidy under his cap?
 Can she still see his earring?

Millimetres above his skin,
 the clippers hum in her hand. She
 presses as gently as she can.
 Yet his skin blossoms, red;

a line of a scratch emerges,
 its edges beaded with blood.
 She blows. Blond fuzz floats away
 like dandelion seeds.

Later, watching her knit herself a scarf,
 he winds wool, the colour of sunsets,
 around and around his fingers.
 He wants one the same colour.

Where do you want to wear it? she asks,
 when he talks about his friend Danielle,
 who has a purple scarf
 that she wears every day in winter.

He snuggles into her shoulder.
*She wants to be the kind of mother
 who knits for her son*
 —defenceless, utterly tender—

says that he doesn't mind if
 she makes him a pink scarf for home,
a pink scarf with tassels.
 And a blue and red one for school.

December 2: A Love Poem

For Annabeth and Tom

Near midnight our house groans
with the heat of summer and the
breeze rushes though

my ears like river water.
You sigh, as sleep takes you, and I
press my fingers, like small stones

against your shoulder.
Our daughter sleeps,
wrapped like a present in cotton bedding.

Our son will come to us from far away,
peeling the day open with his cry.
This afternoon, while I read,

you cut roses for the table: lush,
jewelled cups of umber and russet.
I listened to music and it rose and fell

with the pulse of my blood. And I
know that here, in my heart,
(where only precious things take hold)
I am, because you are.

For Just Three Minutes

For Bella

I will slip beneath the water
while my brother draws pictures with his fingers
on the bathroom wall,
while the mirror mists with fog,
while my sister reads in a nearby room,
while my father sleeps, sick with flu,
while my mother works on the computer.

I know you wonder what it feels like
to be three years old,
to slip beneath the water,
to close your lungs to air.

It feels like falling.

Not darkness, exactly,
but an absence of light,
as if shadow had bound itself to light
and in doing so, revealed its truest contours.

I fall

deep beneath the skin of me,
to the silent core,
to swim with creatures, who,
without form or substance,
have no need of names,
content to be dreamt into existence.

I can see my sister
pulling me from the water,
laying me, curled in on myself,
like a tender question mark
on the cold tiled floor.
My brother calls to my mother,
who comes running down the endless passageway,
gathers me up
heavywet, still warm, into her arms,
a burden she can hardly bear to carry,
now running with me,

grey,
unbreathing,
silent.

She will reach, finally,
her bedroom,
to hand over the burden of my body
to my father,
groggy, roused from sleep.

I know that for ever after
they will all feel the darkening pull,
the blind malice of water.

And I will be forced
to close my lungs and ears
to the luminous music of this water,
to lament its passing,
and return to them.

I like the way

there are places on my body where stories
are reduced to vowel sounds

fragments

small mouths frozen in their moment of
pain & surprise. Choose one instance
pare back its skin
try to capture the eloquence
of those silver-stoppered mouths.

I emerge from the clutches of sleep with
one perfect line that
will not wait 'til morning.
I am learning to measure
happiness.